An Appraisal of Environmental Microhistory: Epistemological and Historiographical Insights

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ABSTRACT

The late flourishing of environmental history has been accompanied by attempts to combine it with a microhistorical approach, improving our understanding of specific events of the past as well as pointing to relevant historical insights at the macro level, which might inform policy-driven contemporary debates on environmental issues. Therefore, this article attempts to shed light on the epistemology and historiography of microhistory, stressing its basis on the indiciary paradigm as avowed by the Italian microhistorian Carlo Ginzburg, its emphasis on context, relations and connections, and its potential for unveiling new information at the macro level. It is asserted that these features make the microhistorical approach an adequate methodological tool to environmental history, anticipating a fruitful future for environmental microhistory.

Keywords: Microhistory; Environmental History; Indiciary Paradigm.

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Microhistory has recently been defined by Szijártó (2016 p.191) as the junction of the three following characteristics:

> first of all, the intensive historical investigation of a relatively well defined smaller object (be it a single event, a local community or an individual), then, the conviction of the microhistorians that this investigation can lead them to finding answers to 'great historical questions', and, finally, that microhistory always regards those who lived in the past as actors, people who made decisions and thus form their lives in an active fashion.

A more epistemological statement regarding microhistory has been given by Giovanni Levi (1991 p.106): a historiographical approach that "addresses the problem of how we gain access to knowledge of the past by means of various clues, signs and symptoms". The author adds that "this is a procedure which takes the particular as its starting-point (a particular which is often highly specific and individual, and would be impossible to describe as a typical case) and proceeds to identify its meaning in the light of its own specific context".

Giovanni Levi, Carlo Ginzburg and Simona Cerutti were among the Italian scholars that founded the *Microstorie* series in the 1970s, drawing attention to historical studies based on the life of seemingly average individuals such as Menocchio, the sixteenth-century miller in Ginzburg's well-known *The Cheese and the Worms* (Ginzburg 1980).

On the other hand, environmental history has been defined by McNeill (2003 p.6), rather plainly, as "the history of the mutual relations between humankind and the rest of nature". Such encompassing characterization reflects its wide-ranging set of subjects and approaches, comprising, according to Worster (1988), three interconnected levels: the environment itself, human impacts on the environment and human thought about the environment. It has appeared in tandem with the environmental movements of the 1970s, in an effort to reassess human values and attitudes toward the natural world. Despite its first pessimistic accounts of the worsening deterioration of the human-nature relationship, with a clear underlying moral imperative, it has eventually grown into a discipline whose "principal goal became one of deepening our understanding of how humans have been affected by their natural environment through time and, conversely, how they have affected that environment and with what results" (Worster 1988 p. 290). Despite its more recent objectivity, a genuine concern for environmental issues still plays a significant role in the current boom seen in this subdiscipline, with McNeill (2003 p.42) stating that it "has grown like a weed in the past twenty-five years, to the point where no mortal can keep pace with it" and that "it can claim with justice to have become one of the most vital sub-fields within the historical discipline, at least in a handful of countries."

A growing diversity of methodological approaches has accompanied the late flourishing of environmental history, microhistory among them. In order to understand what the potential

methodological contributions of microhistory to environmental history are, it is necessary to explore the former's epistemological precepts and historiography. The indiciary paradigm, the micro-macro link, the "exceptional normal" and the role of context and relations stand out as the main categories that need further clarification in this regard. These categories can then be applied to concepts dear to environmental historians, such as socioecological transformations, ecosystems, communities and natural cycles.

Therefore, in the next two sections, this article attempts to shed light on the epistemology and historiography of microhistory, aiming to assess its adequacy as a methodology to environmental history. The theoretical analysis is complemented by observations about a few recent examples of studies in environmental history that adopt a microhistorical approach. Finally, a few conclusions are drawn on the relevance and fruitfulness of such an environmental microhistory.

THE INDICIARY PARADIGM, MICROHISTORY AND THE MICRO-MACRO LINK

Ginzburg's approach to history is based on an epistemological model termed the semiotic or indiciary paradigm (Ginzburg 1979, 1989). It refers to a type of conjectural, qualitative knowledge anchored in concrete experiences (clues, signs, symptoms etc.) to unveil a certain truth. Employed for millennia by hunters, physicians, fortune tellers and in many other activities less prone to a "scientific" assessment (in the modern, positivistic sense of the expression), it was further advanced by semiotic studies in the late nineteenth century and, still according to the author, widely put into practice in the human sciences. Residual or marginal clues would be a powerful tool, if cunningly interpreted, to reach a deeper understanding of a meaningful phenomenon or reality, including aspects of the past and future. Unlike the Galilean scientific paradigm, this alternative epistemological framework would be ingrained in traditional knowledge, reflecting an anthropocentric view in which a "flexible rigor" (Ginzburg 1989 p.179) would allow for imponderable elements such as intuition or acumen.

Ginzburg (1991) has drawn attention to the search for evidence as a methodological link between history and the judicial practice. Historians, as judges, would combine the analysis of specific cases – a practice emphatically adopted by physicians, with their clue-based indiciary nature of clinical methods and semiotic models (Quadrelli et al. 2014) – with the rhetorical aspects of the communication of their results. However, historians would need to go beyond a court-like approach to events, as in the latter the verdict calls for an unequivocal cause-effect relationship between an individual and an action. Understanding the past would have to take precedence over judging it, thus not disregarding less tangible circumstances such as social factors (e.g. the *mentalités* of the Annales School). The inevitably inferential work of the historian, to Ginzburg, can only succeed if the roles of evidence and imagination

are properly comprehended as parts of the narrative construction process, respectively through empirical research and the use of language, with its rhetorical and cognitive constitutive elements. Therefore, an acceptable balance between fiction and reality could be attained through an adequate selection of criteria of truth, rather than relying on an unachievable absolute measure of truth.

Microhistory has thus corroborated the "linguistic turn" of the 1970s – understood as a new emphasis in the social sciences on linguistic philosophy, more specifically on the role of language in the creation of meaning and demarcation of knowledge – with its renewed acknowledgement of the weight of historical narratives and their inseparable implications to cognition. Incurring in the perils of blurring the lines between history and literature – and thereby putting an end to the Rankean paradigm – would be compensated by the chance to expand the boundaries of historical knowledge (Neves 2011). Such progress would ultimately be due to a balanced mix of imagination and realism, as done by Ginzburg and others in their redemption of the average individual as a worthwhile subject of study.

Based on these epistemological and methodological questions, Ginzburg (1993 p.32) elaborates on his view of microhistory as research that "has looked at subjects of acknowledged importance as well as themes that had been previously ignored or relegated to spheres considered inferior, such as local history". Against criticism that links microhistory to a postmodern historiography "of contemplation of the fragmentary" (Ankersmit 1989), Ginzburg emphasizes the importance given to context in the Italian microhistory research programme. But it is in relation to the opposition of the Annales School of Braudel and the prominence of the *longue durée* that Ginzburg first sees microhistory as a distinguished historiographical approach:

> the choice of a circumscribed and close-up perspective reveals a dissatisfaction (…) with the macroscopic and quantitative model that dominated the international historiographical scene between the mid-1950s and mid-1970s, primarily through the activity of Fernand Braudel and the historians of the Annales school (Ginzburg 1993 p.17).

Braudel (1980) dismissed the so-called history of events (*histoire événementielle*) as uninteresting and worryingly exaggerating the role of protagonists. He saw historical merit in addressing the "typical", given its repetitive nature; however, microhistorians would inescapably fail in their overly technical attempt to apprehend singularity. Braudel's position was countered by Magnússon (2003), who asserted that it would be "the singularity – the unit itself – that has by far the greatest epistemological value of all the possibilities available" (p.721). Magnússon characterizes the "singularization of history" as consisting of "avoiding the metanarratives which direct the course of research and, instead, giving research the freedom to find its own course within the subject material with the support of the ideology of microhistory" (p.723). Although the interpretation of microhistory

as an ideology is problematic – it might convey the misguided notion that the issue at hand is the replacement of one ideology by another, disregarding the potential benefits of adopting complementary methodologies –, such view stresses the role of small historical units (particular events and phenomena) seen as pieces of historical reality whose details are subject to more precise scrutiny and without an immediate (although possible and desirable) need to fit at higher contextual levels.

Ginzburg (1993 p.33) responded to Braudel's disapproval with the argument that the "microscopic sphere cannot be automatically transferred to a macroscopic sphere (and vice versa)", implying that microhistory is not the right way, but definitely a valuable way to reveal and understand the past through opportunities created by research on the micro-macro link. This heterogeneity is posed as a challenge, but also as a prospective source of new knowledge about the past. Residual, marginal or anomalous circumstances (as opposed to the importance given by Braudel to the repetitive nature of the analogous), the so-called "exceptional normal", might provide crucial, thitherto overlooked historical insights, once the intricacies of social structures and their relationship to the individual level can be better assessed upon close examination. As put by Levi (1991 p.97): "the unifying principle of all microhistorical research is the belief that microscopic observation will reveal factors previously unobserved".

Other noteworthy comments on microhistory have come from Douki and Minard (2007), who have assigned a specific meaning to the term "global history": a methodological approach that transcends the usual compartmentalization of historical research, embracing plural perspectives and emphasizing context in a wider scale rather than determined objects of study. Connections (the authors use the term "connected histories"), interactions or relations at the micro and macro levels – and between them – should take precedence over state borders in the historical analysis. Changing the scale more freely would contribute to uncover inconsistencies or missing elements. The authors correctly affirm that, in this sense, "*microstoria* and connected history are hardly incompatible. On the contrary, they both seek to tear down barriers by bringing together social, economic, cultural, and political aspects; they both aim to render the substance of social interplay and the global nature of the exchanges at its core" (p.14-15). However, the same authors warn against the neglect of the macro level in microhistorical analysis, suggesting that grand narratives should not be replaced by accounts of scattered objects (something that could be fostered by academic interests in keeping increasingly isolated subdisciplines and research groups). They fear that "[r]hetorical pledges to microhistory often function as a convenient alibi to obfuscate a plain and simple perpetuation of a traditional type of studies that owes nothing to Italian *microstoria* except its restriction to a local context" (p.10). Although this last passage is misleading in terms of the differentiation between microhistory and the "traditional

type of studies", overlooking the novel epistemological character of the former and the centrality of the micro-macro link for microhistorians, the institutional concern is justified. The authors focus instead on the importance of adopting new scales of observation, rather than the local, in the identification of unseen connections (in this regard, see also Revel [2010]). This stance is, nevertheless, at best complementary to microhistory, as it doesn't share the epistemology of the indiciary paradigm.

A more interesting take on the relations between microhistory and global history has been put forward by Epple (2012), to whom the decay of national history – aggravated by globalization processes, which render difficult to presume that fixed national borders are still to be seen as legitimate entities – has been answered with either one of three approaches: (i) world history, (ii) global or transnational or entangled history and (iii) subaltern and postcolonial history. Epple sees the two latter reactions as the most promising way to understand "global-local entanglements", which could be assisted by microhistory in their quest for establishing meaningful, contextualized and non-teleological micro-macro links. The connectedness of the local and the global is made explicit: "[a] closer look at the relation between the global and the local reveals that both are in fact tied inseparably together. I believe we can only understand the global while studying the local" (p.263). Delving further into the issue, the author rejects the dichotomy present in the preponderant relational aspect of the global and the geographically determination of the local. She calls for the notion of translocality, perceiving the local through its relations to other localities. Such practice would allow for a better understanding of the global. "If we study the local by studying translocal relations with a microhistorical approach, we get to global history through the sum of all translocalities. Whereas this sum is actually always in motion, the global itself becomes dynamic and historically changeable" (p.264). The "history of relations" arising therefrom has been dubbed by the author "global microhistory" (Epple 2012a).

Finally, Peltonen (2001) endorses the originality of this new microhistory, which provides a fresh view on the relations between the micro and macro levels, amalgamating and transcending the concepts of exceptionality and typicality into the notion of an "exceptional normal" or "exceptional typical" that aims to transform into fruitful research the difficulties traditionally associated with the micro-macro link. It would not be a matter of simple reduction or aggregation, ranging from singular historical events and actors to representations of a collective, but of capturing new qualitative information in the process, something unlikely to happen in cases of typicality or exceptionality alone. Studying an event both in terms of its borderline and more typical characteristics in relation to a larger group could lead to a more accurate representation of its nature, producing a comprehensive understanding while establishing micro-macro links. To Peltonen, Ginzburg would thus be able to draw original insights at the macro level from observations at the micro level through the "collision of an

exceptional event with the long historical structure of popular culture. This special moment brings into the open structures whose importance is much more difficult, if not impossible, to see in other periods. Micro historians are actually trying to discover very big things with their microscopes and magnifying lenses" (Peltonen 2001 p.350). According to the author, similar positions could be found in Michel de Certeau's (1992) methodological work, given his interest in significant deviations of the macroscopic or quantitative models pertaining social phenomena, as illustrated by his well-known *The Possession at Loudun* (De Certeau 2000); and in Walter Benjamin's (1999) stance on the micro-macro link, based on the Leibnizian concept of monad as akin to the idea of singularization of history, through which local or apparently circumscribed events might, if sufficiently meaningful or exceptional, contain the elements needed for broader generalizations in terms of macro-level structures, e.g. the Parisian arcades and the appearance of modern commercial life.

ENVIRONMENTAL MICROHISTORY

There is a general assumption that, since environmental changes usually take a much longer time to take place than social changes, environmental history would be mainly concerned with longer historical periods. Nevertheless, anthropogenic intervention throughout the twentieth century and a deeper understanding of ecological dynamics have altered this view, with environmental changes seen as happening with increased tempo or presenting non-linear behavior, with tipping points leading to quick system imbalances and potentially disastrous outcomes. This and a reinvigorated interest for local issues have led to the combination of microhistory and environmental history, making way for a burgeoning literature on the new subdiscipline of environmental microhistory, mainly during the last two decades, which seeks to contribute to the body of environmental studies by improving our understanding of specific events of the past as well as by pointing to relevant historical insights at the macro level which might inform contemporary debates. A few examples might better illustrate the current trend.

Beach (1998) examines the microhistory of early twentieth century non-native settlers of Ootsa Lake, in the Canadian province of British Columbia, stressing the marginal or exceptional character of their relationship to the local environment. Unlike the prevalent macrohistorical view of the western conquest of European fortune-seeking settlers without meaningful ties to the land, the author tells the story of a community that has quickly learned how to adapt to local resource-rich but harsh environmental conditions, successfully providing for themselves through a subsistence or barter economy, while accumulating knowledge and strengthening personal and community identities as well as fundamental ecological values. Such account unveils new elements of the historical development of

British Columbian society and also informs current scientific or more policy-driven discussions on bottom-up alternative ways of building more sustainable human organizations.

Another example is Sodikoff's (2007) anthropological research in Madagascar, which has led to an oral microhistory of the strike and unionization of low-wage conservation workers employed by the Integrated Conservation and Development Project (ICDP) – an initiative aimed at rainforest protection – at the Special Reserve of Andasibe in the 1990s. Former holders of tenured civil service positions, these workers were assigned short-term contracts under the newly decentralized forest governance, suffering constant intimidation and threats of layoffs and wage reductions. They saw themselves undervalued by the administration, although performing critical tasks to the conservation of the forest and, if laid-off, being able to actually induce forest erosion, as they would predictably turn to logging for survival. These aspects are not mentioned in project documentation, are ignored by management and escape a wider institutional perception. Called by the author a "microhistory of neoliberal conservation politics in Madagascar" (p.11), such labor issue indicate larger structural elements of society, such as the functioning of high-tier international conservation and development institutions and the inner workings and prospects of green capitalism in poor countries. The limited temporal and spatial scale of the event in focus (the strike), otherwise seen as an outlier, is, therefore, "symptomatic of the larger problem concerning the conceptualization and politicization of rain forest and biodiversity conservation efforts" (p.13).

Rosenthal (2017), in turn, pushes the boundaries of environmental microhistory, telling the story of a tropical cyclone that struck Apia, Samoa, on March 16th 1889. His account covers a period of just 24 hours and employs a mix of unusual narrative devices, exploring the possibilities of microhistorical storytelling in order to call attention to the potential contributions of microhistory to the "big questions". In this case, a seemingly typical event – being tropical cyclones seasonal in Samoa – in remote Apia has assisted in revealing dynamics of territorial disputes between colonial Western powers and also their relationship to the native people. The author highlights the role of human and non-human forces in historical events, connecting structural processes of the *longue durée* to "momentary flourishes of human agency" (p.21).

The above and other initiatives (e.g. Petrić 2004, Bonnell 2010, Roberts 2010) illustrate the significance of environmental microhistory to the creation of new historical knowledge and its relevance for decision and policy making in the present.

Even before the upsurge of such type of literature, Worster (1988) had already contended that environmental history shares the revisionist efforts of late twentieth-century historians to include a

wider range of narratives, denying the prominence of the nation-state as the main reference of historical studies. He goes beyond, pointing to a very close relationship between microhistory and environmental history:

> Historians lost some of their confidence that the past had been so thoroughly controlled or summed up by a few great men acting in positions of national power. Scholars began uncovering long submerged layers, the lives and thoughts of ordinary people, and tried to conceive history "from the bottom up". Down, down we must go, they maintained, down to the hidden layers of class, gender, race, and caste. There we will find what truly has shaped the surface layers of politics. Now enter still another group of reformers, the environmental historians, who insist that we have got to go still deeper yet, down to the earth itself as an agent and presence in history. Here we will discover even more fundamental forces at work over time (Worster 1988 p.289).

Bonnell (2010) adds that both microhistory and environmental history share a focus on relationships or connections that arises from the detailed process of assessing interactions in each context, whether among individuals or among individuals and their natural surroundings. This epistemological characteristic would be in sync with the basic precepts of ecology, which are based on the interconnected dynamics of living and non-living elements. Scoones (1999) elaborates on the benefits of historical analysis to a new concept of ecology, emerging in the end of the twentieth century, which moves away from static, balance-in-nature approaches to the discipline. The ability to grasp time and space dynamics and their effects on interconnected social and environmental changes would make historical research an important part of a proposed mixed methodology for the so-called "new ecology". However, Scoones has failed to see the specific contributions of an environmental microhistory to the purpose at hand, linking a micro-level understanding of social and ecological processes to ecological anthropology, when he could just as well be doing so to environmental microhistory.

Arndt (2016), in turn, stresses that an environmental microhistory would possess a remarkable capacity to link the micro and macro levels. The analysis of specific phenomena such as regional weather patterns, polluted river basins or a bad past agricultural harvest would be able to provide new information with significant consequences in the larger picture, such as broader, more permanent social or ecological transformations. This ability would suggest a strong link between micro and global environmental history, one that doesn't concern itself with national boundaries, thus transnational or entangled, much in the same way as the subdiscipline's objects of study: biological, geological and chemical cycles, energy flows, ecosystems, communities, biomes, weather systems, plants, wildlife etc.

Sandwell (2009) follows the same line of thought, recognizing in environmental microhistory an effort to understand the complex relationships between people and their immediate physical world from a local starting point. Given that "the most commonly recognized kind of microhistory is the

community-based study" and that "microhistorians' work can offer some particular insights into the ways in which general patterns or average behaviors were experienced at the individual or local level" (p.124), with their variations and exceptions, such an "ecosystem approach" would constitute an adequate methodology for environmental history. Also, there would be an epistemological benefit for environmental history in adopting microhistorical methodology: understanding complex human-nature relationships through the comprehensive research of empirical evidence. After all, as the author ingeniously states, for a historical study to be considered microhistory, it does not suffice to choose a unit of research that is small enough to allow for the details of everyday life to be observed, but there must also be sufficient documentation available to provide answers to the intended questions, as well as some kind of metric that determines and distinguishes what is and what is not within the object of study. Again, the circumstances play in favor of the use of microhistory by environmental historians, as their units of research are rather given either by determinate ecological communities (a group of interacting living and non-living elements) or by physical traits (landscapes, watersheds, geological formations etc.), as opposed to the often difficult delineation of the object of study based on cultural elements. Lastly, as well put by Worster (1988 p.136), in exchange for providing environmental history with "a focus and a process", microhistory can learn from it how to "pay more attention to the particularities of the physical world, augmenting our understanding of the relations among people and places".

The above appraisal of environmental microhistory, both in actual and prospective, epistemological, methodological and historiographical domains, hints toward the potential of microhistory to understanding human-nature relations at different scales of inquiry. It restores the role of human agency, each individual as transformer of and transformed by the natural world. The subdiscipline of environmental history is here deemed to be a good example of application of the microhistorical approach, lying ahead the task of drawing worthwhile links between micro and macro, social and ecological, cultural and physical processes. The study of past local (or translocal) socioecological transformations might unearth clues, signs and symptoms which can be highly valuable to interpret broader or global phenomena, not only for deepening our historical comprehension, but also for informing today's debates of critical importance for public policy implementation, e.g. climate change, land and water use or biodiversity loss.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

This article has tried to demonstrate how microhistory can offer a sound epistemological and methodological framework to the research of environmental historians. The smaller scale, the

"exceptional normal", the search for clues and the emphasis given to relationships and their contexts have been identified as suitable and helpful features to the study of the interplay between humans and nature through time. In addition, the capacity of microhistory to provide new knowledge at the macro level has been acknowledged as a key aspect for its consolidation as means to keep broadening and deepening historical knowledge, an achievement that seems to be motivating a growing literature in environmental microhistory, both in terms of quantity and of quality. Finally, the subdiscipline's potential to inform policy-driven debates on an era of environmental peril at planetary scale should be cause for further efforts and support in favor of a microhistorical approach to environmental studies and related areas.

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Uma Avaliação da Micro-história Ambiental: Notas Epistemológicas e Historiográficas

RESUMO

O desenvolvimento recente da história ambiental tem sido acompanhado por tentativas de combiná-la com a abordagem micro-histórica, aprimorando a compreensão de eventos específicos do passado e apontando para *insights* históricos relevantes em nível "macro", que podem melhor informar debates contemporâneos orientados à elaboração de políticas públicas ambientais. Assim, o artigo apresenta aspectos da epistemologia e da historiografia da micro-história, enfatizando sua base no paradigma indiciário tal como apresentado pelo micro-historiador italiano Carlo Ginzburg, sua ênfase em contextos, relações e conexões, e seu potencial para revelar novas informações em nível "macro". Afirma-se que essas características tornam a abordagem micro-histórica uma ferramenta metodológica adequada para a história ambiental, antecipando um futuro próspero para a micro-história ambiental.

Palavras-Chave: Micro-História; História Ambiental; Paradigma Indiciário.

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